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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000140

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE CONSIDERS TURKS TOLERANT
OF CHRISTIANS

REF: 08 ISTANBUL 595

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. During an April 10th meeting, the Ecumenical Patriarchate's press relations representative, Father Dositheos, explained the continuing problems the Patriarchate faces to Senator Jeff Sessions (R-AL) and Representative Chris Carney (D-PA). The list of challenges -- including the need to open Halki Seminary, the Patriarchate's lack of legal personality, and the GOT's refusal to use the term "ecumenical" with reference to the patriarchate -- has remained the same for decades. Dositheos also claimed the Turkish public is far more tolerant of Christians and non-Muslim institutions than are most Turkish elected officials and bureaucrats. End Summary.

Same Challenges: Halki, Legality, Ecumenicity

¶2. (C) Father Dositheos commended President Obama for his "brave remarks" to the Turkish Parliament on April 6. It was the first time, he said, that any leader dared to mention the issue of the Halki Seminary in such a setting. While other presidents and U.S. officials have spent many years working to open Halki, Dositheos hopes Obama's bravery will make a difference. The opening of Halki is of great importance to the Orthodox world because no other seminary provided such an ecumenical approach to training Orthodox priests for the future. Dositheos contended that the seminaries in Athens and Thessaloniki are rather conservative and not as open to different views of Orthodoxy. Ultimately, he said, the Patriarchate would like to see Halki opened in the same format as it had been prior to its closure in 1971. Many people are confused about how Halki would be set up upon reopening, and he complained that the European Union representatives believed that the Patriarchate would open Halki as a private Greek institution. This is not the case, Dositheos emphatically said. Instead, it would return to being a Turkish institution under the oversight of both the Board for Higher Education (YOK) and the Patriarchate.

¶3. (SBU) Dositheos also touched upon the challenges of operating as an institution without a legal personality. Specifically, the Ecumenical Patriarchate cannot have its own bank account or own its own property. Additionally, the GOT and state institutions view the Ecumenical Patriarch as the Patriarchate's representative, and "hassle" him whenever there is a problem, rather than contact his appointed legal representatives.

¶4. (SBU) Finally, Dositheos said he personally finds the GOT's refusal to use the term "ecumenical" when referring to

the Patriarchate as offensive and confusing. (Note: The Ecumenical Patriarch himself does not place high importance on this issue. Ref A.) The Patriarchate refers to itself as the Greek Patriarchate of Fener in all of its correspondence with the GOT, while externally it is known as the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Turkey will never be like the Middle East

15. (C) In response to a question, Father Dositheos speculated the Orthodox Church might have been able to prevent its current suffocated position if it had actively worked to convert the Turkic population before the Ottoman invasion centuries ago. He also noted, however, that Turkey was very different from other Islamic countries. Most of the Turkish people, especially those in the East of Turkey, have long "social memories" that make them very tolerant of Christians, "Likely because they know that their own family was probably Assyrian, Armenian, or Greek Christian at some point." Turkey will never be like the Middle East, Dositheos said. "Unfortunately," he lamented, "the official representatives of the people are not as tolerant." Dositheos specifically identified MHP and CHP parliamentary representatives, whom he considered far less tolerant than their constituents.

16. (C) Comment: Dositheos' comments put context to a paradox that is clear to many who work with human rights issues in Turkey. The state's suspicion of "foreign" (non-Muslim) elements in Turkish society, as well as some GOT officials'

ISTANBUL 00000140 002 OF 002

use of "foreign" scapegoats, oddly coexists with a general tolerance by the Turkish public. The religiously mixed background of many communities in the Southeast makes it easier to accept these "foreign" elements as their own. End Comment.
Wiener